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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 001016

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SUBJECT: RCTV CLOSURE: UNSUBSTANTIATED RUMORS OF VIOLENCE

REF: CARACAS 000990

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASONS 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. The Caracas rumor mill is in full gear as the BRV's announced May 28 date for the closure of independent broadcaster RCTV approaches. Most of these rumors are being fueled by President Chavez and other senior BRV officials who have alleged for several months that the opposition, assisted by the United States and other "foreign enemies," is preparing to wage a violent "destabilization" campaign against the BRV at the end of May. We have also heard from opposition and media sources that the BRV intends to use violence against opposition activists, seize RCTV's assets, and take over a critical opposition cable television station. Wishful thinkers argue that the Supreme Court will prevent RCTV's closure at the eleventh hour. While we do not as a practice report on rumors, the fact that these focus on the possibility of violence, and come in the unsettled context of the RCTV closure, led us to conclude that this report and comment were necessary. We do not put much stock in any of these rumors, although it is possible that the National Guard will seize RCTV assets and pro-government actors may provoke street clashes with RCTV supporters. Similar to the run-up to the December 6, 2006, presidential election, many Venezuelans are wary of the potential for political violence. End Summary.

Rumor #1: Assassination Attempt on Chavez

¶2. (C) In recent weeks, President Chavez has frequently alleged in speeches that he is the target of assassination plots ("magnicidio"). His stock, unsubstantiated assertion is that the United States ("the empire"), unable to thwart his "socialist revolution," is funding extremist opposition groups ("oligarchs") to eliminate him. He also asserted that Luis Posada Carriles was released in the United States to help organize an assassination plot against Chavez. Former Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel also alleged in a May 20 article in the pro-government daily "Vea" that a new "Holy Alliance" among right-wing groups in Chile, Mexico, Peru, and Miami is forming to depose Chavez. In fact, BRV officials have since February made allegations that the opposition had something planned for the end of May. Citing unnamed analysts, Rangel asserts that "anti-Chavez laboratories for dirty war" are being moved from Miami to Santiago. Another variant of this BRV-fueled rumor is that Colombian paramilitary personnel have "infiltrated" Venezuela and are

preparing violent attacks on government targets.

Rumor #2: Opposition Destabilization Campaign

¶3. (C) Minister of Popular Power for Interior and Justice Pedro Carreno held a May 21 press conference to denounce alleged conspiracies against the "political stability and domestic peace" of Venezuela. Carreno announced that on May 19 Venezuelan law enforcement authorities arrested two persons in Caracas on arms trafficking charges and seized from them a small number of automatic weapons. Later the same day, the Venezuelan police arrested another person in Caracas, seizing more weapons. Carreno alleged that the three persons are part of an effort by Chavez opponents to plan attacks to "heat up" the political climate.

Additionally, there is a purported police intelligence (DISIP) report dated May 3 getting wide distribution on the internet that alleges an opposition campaign. The purported memo accuses the opposition, with USG support, of planning street protests aimed at "repeating the events of April 11, 2002," when Chavez was briefly removed from power. There is also an unsubstantiated rumor that some 500 airborne personnel, considered more loyal to Chavez, have been transferred from Maracay to Fort Tiuna in Caracas in case of RCTV-related trouble. There are confirmed reports that military units have been placed on alert in the run-up to May ¶28.

Rumor #3: RCTV Takes Over Competitor

¶4. (C) A business dispute between an advertising company aligned with Chavismo and the former owner of the television station La Tele has spilled out into the public eye via dueling full-page newspaper ads paid by both sides. Former owner of La Tele television station Hernan Perez Belisario

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protested the Grupo Imagen's publication of an old picture of him with RCTV owner Marcel Granier. Belisario used to work with RCTV, but left in 1988. According to Belisario, Grupo Imagen is insinuating that Belisario intends to recuperate ownership of La Tele and then incorporate former RCTV employees to transform the station into an opposition station. Grupo Imagen is asserting that Belisario hid the poor financial condition of La Tele, was justly compensated for the sale, and that his pending lawsuit should be thrown out.

Rumor #4: BRV Preparing Crackdown

¶5. (C) Antonio Ledezma, President of Alianza Bravo Pueblo and one of the principal organizers of the May 26 and 27 RCTV solidarity marches, told PolCouns May 24 that he fears the BRV is preparing to use violence against the opposition. Ledezma believes Chavez is interested in provoking a crackdown on the opposition in order to reunite his supporters, whom he said are increasingly divided over Chavez' efforts to form a single "revolutionary" party and pending state and local redistricting proposals. Pro-Chavez groups vandalized the entrance to Venezuela's largest employer association (Fedecameras) on May 24. Media sources are telling us that the BRV is planning to take over the opposition-oriented cable Globovision after RCTV's closure in the next 30 days. The BRV is already trying to smear Globovision along with RCTV. The May 22 "La Hojilla" program on government-run VTV showed State Department documents released in a FOIA request related to the International Visitor Programs (IVP's) of four RCTV and Globovision journalists, falsely accusing them of being paid "agents" of the USG. The show's host promised more such "revelations" on May 24.

Rumor #5: Supreme Court Orders Stay on Closure

¶ 6. (C) Some RCTV supporters are suggesting that the Supreme Court will grant RCTV judicial relief at the eleventh hour. According to this rumor, Chavez is feeling international and domestic pressure, and he will orchestrate a late game judicial remedy as a face-saving way to reverse his decision to close the station. All the court rulings to date have been, not surprisingly, against RCTV. First the Supreme Court's Constitutional Chamber struck down RCTV's pending plea for judicial protection on May 17, declaring it "inadmissible." The Supreme Court's Political and Administrative Chamber ruled May 23 that it has jurisdiction, clearing the way for a possible hearing, but refused to stay BRV plans to close RCTV and begin Teves broadcasting in its place. Wishful thinkers nevertheless note that RCTV still has not yet reached the end of its legal battle, and suggest that RCTV owner Marcel Granier's public offer to step down could pave the way of a station-saving deal.

Rumor #6: National Guard to Seize RCTV Assets

¶ 7. (C) According to RCTV lawyer Oswaldo Quintana, a Vice Minister of Labor told members of the Bolivarian Workers Union that National Guard personnel would be deployed to RCTV May 28 to protect the station's technical equipment against politically-motivated vandalism. Quintana and other RCTV insiders told us that without seizing RCTV's technical equipment, the BRV does not have the capacity to transmit a signal nationwide. BRV officials recently confirmed that Teves initially will only reach Caracas and Zulia State, but note that the station will expand its broadcasting more broadly by the end of 2007. Minister of Popular Power for Communication and Information William Lara recently suggested in a TV interview with former VP Rangel that RCTV owes back taxes to the BRV (SENIAT). The BRV has used the accusation of non-payment of taxes to seize assets in previous expropriations. In addition, the latest court ruling implied that the BRV would have legal grounds to seize RCTV's physical assets.

The Impact

¶ 8. (C) RCTV is calling on its employees not to engage in civil disobedience during the expected May 27-28 shutdown of RCTV, thus significantly diminishing the prospect of violence. Demonstrations for and against the RCTV closure are scheduled for May 26 and 27, but they are not likely to

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be as big as the March 19 RCTV solidarity rally which took place without incident. Nevertheless, many Venezuelans, much as they did before the December 6, 2006 presidential election, are expressing concern about the prospect of political violence. Organizers of the March 27 solidarity march to RCTV have heard that the BRV is preparing a stage in front of RCTV to celebrate the station's closure. They are advising participants not be provoked, but at the same time, say participants will "not keep their hands folded" if attacked. Many Caracas residents who can afford to are stocking up on food (at least, foodstuffs that are available and not in short supply due to price controls) and water -- just in case. One of Caracas' two major international schools has moved its graduation up to May 26 to avoid coinciding with a pro-RCTV rally. The Embassy is reminding personnel to avoid areas where demonstrations are likely to occur. In addition, RSO is working with local police to ensure security support to USG facilities should that be needed.

Comment

¶ 9. (C) While we do not as a practice report on rumors, the

fact that these focus on the possibility of violence, and come in the unsettled context of the RCTV closure, led us to conclude that this report and comment were necessary. Embassy does not believe BRV-fueled rumors of opposition violence are credible, although we do not rule out incidents of intimidation and vandalism by pro-government actors. Venezuela's opposition remains weak and divided and RCTV marches so far have failed to mobilize enormous crowds like the ones that marched in Caracas in the run-up to the 2004 recall referendum. The BRV's destabilization campaign rumors conveniently distract international attention and domestic focus from the fact that the BRV is about to take Venezuela's last non-subscription independent television broadcaster off the air. They also serve as a warning to opposition groups that the BRV may be preparing to crack down on them further. Embassy also does not put much stock in other rumors that RCTV may find a new home in La Tele or last minute judicial relief. The May 27 demonstrations for and against RCTV could be a potential flash point for street clashes, although both sides insist they are asking marchers to be peaceful. There does remain, however, some possibility that the BRV will seize RCTV assets in order to assist Teves to broadcast nationwide, but given the BRV's announcement that Teves initially will only be seen in Caracas and Zulia State, an immediate takeover of RCTV technical equipment does not appear necessary.

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